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Is the Reincarnation Hypothesis Advanced by Stevenson for Spontaneous Past-life Experiences Relevant for the Understanding of the Ontology of Past-life Phenomena?

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A significant volume of scientific evidence, uncovered by reincarnation research in the last 50 years, supports the reincarnation hypothesis advanced by Ian Stevenson for spontaneous past-life experiences (PLEs). However, at this time this evidence cannot provide an unquestionable proof of the existence of past-life phenomena, nor can it assert that reincarnation is not possible. This paper suggests that the reincarnation hypothesis, being reasonably parsimonious and relatively exhaustive, may provide a plausible explanation for spontaneous PLEs. Also, based on the probability of the same ontology of spontaneous and hypnotic PLEs, it may be argued that this hypothesis might also be relevant for the hypnotic PLEs, as well as for the understanding of the ontology of past-life phenomena in general.

Keywords: *reincarnation hypothesis, past life, past-life experience, spontaneous past life, hypnotic past life, Stevenson, rebirth, karma, previous personality*

In recent years, the belief in reincarnation has drawn significant attention and continues to gain recognition among researchers and medical professionals, as well as the general public (Kuhlmann-Wilsdorf, 2008; Mills, 2008). The concept of reincarnation is based on the “the notion that a nonphysical element of human existence not only survives but subsequently is reborn in another body” (Irwin, 1989, p. 240). Stevenson (1960a, 1960b) introduced the reincarnation hypothesis in his early studies of children who claimed to remember previous lives and continued to advance this theory in his later works (e.g., 1977, 1983, 1997b, 2000a). He proposed the following explanation of the reincarnation phenomenon:

Reincarnation, briefly defined, includes the idea that men [and women] consist of physical bodies and minds. At a person’s death, his [her] physical body perishes, but his [her] mind may persist and later become associated with another physical body in the process called reincarnation. Some persons find the word “mind” in this definition unclear or otherwise unattractive. They may certainly substitute another word such as “soul” or “individuality.” I intend only to indicate a component of human beings not comprised in our present understanding of their physical bodies, which component may persist after physical death. (1977, footnote 2, p. 305)

As a primary hypothesis used for the scientific investigation of cases suggestive of reincarnation, the reincarnation hypothesis for Stevenson was “not a matter of belief, but an empirical issue, based on very specific experiences and observations” (Grof, 2000, p. 235). Considering the significance of this hypothesis for reincarnation research, scientifically acquired evidence and careful examination of the facts are critical for accepting or rejecting the reincarnation hypothesis.

The reincarnation phenomenon is usually associated with the ability of people to recall what they believe represents their past lives, “reported experiences or impressions of oneself as a particular person (other than one’s current life identity) in a previous time or life” (Mills & Lynn, 2001, p. 285). These past-life experiences (PLEs), which represent individual recollections, are expressly significant for the problem of postmortem survival of human consciousness; they involve recalling and engaging in previous historical life events happening at different geographical locations and “experiential sequences of this kind constitute the empirical basis for the widespread belief in reincarnation” (Grof, 2000, p. 235). Various in-depth investigations of PLE phenomena in the last 50 years have resulted in the accumulation of a vast body of evidence that supports possible plausibility of the reincarnation hypothesis (e.g., Haraldsson, 1991, 1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2008; Mills, 1988, 1990,

1994, 2003; Pasricha, 1990, 1996, 1998, 2008a, 2008b; Stevenson, 1960a, 1960b, 1974, 1977, 1983, 1987, 1997a, 1997b, 2000a, 2003). For that matter, there is a possibility that the reincarnation hypothesis advanced by Stevenson may be relevant to and offer conceptual support for the understanding of the ontology (i.e., a theory about the nature of reality or existence) of PLE phenomena. The exploration of the importance of this hypothesis and its implications for PLE phenomena may also provide better understanding of the evidence gathered as a result of reincarnation studies and improve the methodology of the future reincarnation research.

Past-life recall occurs in several forms, two of which, *spontaneous* and *hypnotic*, represent the corresponding types of reincarnation cases that have been the subject of scientific investigation (Edelman & Bernet, 2007). Spontaneous past-life recalls are documented in the reports of young children who remember the facts, circumstances, and specific details of the life of deceased people and in some instances demonstrate the behavioral patterns and emotional longings inherent in the personalities of these deceased individuals (e.g., Brody, 1979; Matlock, 1990; Mills & Lynn, 2001; Tucker, 2005). Hypnotic past-life memories (PLMs) occur when alleged PLEs are retrieved under hypnosis either in a therapeutic environment during past-life regression therapy or in PLE-related controlled studies. In some cases, hypnotic induction may not be necessary for evoking PLMs (Cranston & Williams, 1999; Head & Cranston, 2000), and the recalls may happen regardless of the participant's belief in past lives (Fiore, 2005).

Evidence of hypnotic PLMs and even spontaneous PLEs still remains controversial based on the skepticism and criticism from the scientific community and failure of some investigations to fully verify the accuracy of the information retrieved from these experiences (Angel, 1994; Edwards, 1987, 1997; Hales, 2001a, 2001b; Sagan, 1996; Swinburne, 1986; Webster, 2009; Wilson, 1981, 1982, 1988). In general, PLEs have received a mixture of interpretations and have been associated with a variety of phenomena that range from paranormal encounters (Braude, 2003; Chari, 1978; Grof, 1994, Hales, 2001a, 2001b; Luke, 2011; Stevenson, 1977) and altered states of consciousness (Luke, 2011; Simões, 2002; Tart, 1974, 1992; Woolger, 1999) to fantasy constructions (Baker, 1982; Dwairy, 2006; Kampman, 1976; Mariott, 1984; Robertson & Gow, 1999; Spanos, 1988, 1996; Spanos, Menary, Gabora, DuBreuil, & Dewhirst, 1991; Venn,

1986; Wickramasekera, 2009), repressed memories (Loftus, 1997, 2000; Pasricha, 2011) or genetic memories (Almeder, 1992; Pasricha, 2006; Stevenson, 1987; Tarazi, 1990), and some others.

Besides spontaneous and hypnotic forms of past-life recall, some voluntary and involuntary manifestations of PLEs have been reported to happen in various therapeutic as well as in non-therapeutic environments (Grof, 1994; Stevenson & Pasricha, 1980): during psychedelic and psycholytic therapies using LSD with psychiatric patient and non-patient populations (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Grof, 1975, 1976, 1980); experiential therapeutic modalities (e.g., Gestalt, primal, rebirthing, holotropic breathing; Grof, 1985; Grof & Bennet, 1993); and various forms of bodywork (e.g., existential holistic therapy, Reichian therapies, Rolfing, psychodrama; Ventegodt et al., 2004; Woolger, 1996, 2000; Grof, 1994). PLEs are also reported to appear under specific psycho-emotional and psychosomatic conditions, such as: sensory isolation (Grof, 1994; Tart, 1996); spontaneous episodes of nonordinary states of consciousness (e.g., spiritual emergencies; Grof & Grof, 1986, 1989); some forms of deep meditative visualization (e.g., yogic concentrated meditation samadhi; Bilimoria & Stansell, 2010), which could be accompanied by psychosomatic reactions (Pagis, 2009); and dreaming in sleep states (Krippner & Faith, 2001).

The recall of PLMs can also occur independently, in parallel or may alternate with regular memories, which an individual retains from different periods of his or her life, including prenatal and perinatal stages of personal development (Grof, 1988, 1992). Spontaneous PLEs reported in adults are less frequent than in children and for the most part are initiated by some memory cues (Mills & Lynn, 2001). They can be compared to very vivid *déjà vu* experiences when an individual is able to provide descriptions of environments and circumstances related to the observed events without any prior knowledge of them (Brown, 2003; Neppe, 2010). Such experiences have been explained as “the residues of experiences from another life,” and they are influenced by socio-cultural factors (Mills & Lynn, 2001, p. 289). A variety of manifestations of PLEs have been reported across geographically, historically, and culturally diverse populations, and PLEs have been known to occur in ordinary, as well as in non-ordinary states of consciousness (Grof, 1985, 1994, 2000; Luke,

2011; Mills & Lynn, 2001; Stevenson, 1977). These manifestations may be qualified as transpersonal since they represent “experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (*trans*) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, *psyche*, and cosmos” (Walsh & Vaughn, 1993, p. 3). PLE phenomena demonstrate the multidimensional nature of human consciousness, show human abilities that are inherent to each individual and which are believed to be part of a human species’ heritage, and define how the potential of a human soul manifests in life (Tart, 1997). The body of research related to PLEs is dependent upon the theory of *rebirth* in general and *reincarnation* in particular, offering a profound insight into the intricate nature of the reincarnation phenomenon (Head & Cranston, 1977, 2000; McClelland, 2010; Rosen, 1997). The term reincarnation, as it is used in this paper, means “re-infleshment and refers to surviving soul or some other spiritually significant aspect of a deceased being assuming a (new) ‘un-souled body’ and, hence, having another life” (McClelland, 2010, p. 231), whereas, rebirth is “the most general and most inclusive term for what is also called reincarnation” (p. 218).

The concept of past lives goes back to the times of ancient Egypt, India, Greece, and Rome (Head & Cranston, 2000; McClelland, 2010). It is closely connected with the theory of reincarnation or rebirth that is part of a number of Eastern religious and philosophical doctrines, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Taoism (Knapp, 2005; Obeyeskere, 2002; Sharma, 1990, 2001; Vincanne, 2001). Some indications of this belief can be found in early Christianity and Judaism (Almeder, 1992; Head & Cranston, 2000; Smith, 2003) and later has also been supported by Western and Middle Eastern systems of philosophical thought, such as Kabbalistic Judaism (Head & Cranston, 2000), Rosicrucian and Cathar Christian traditions (Head & Cranston, 2000; Heindel, 1985), the Alawi and Druze traditions in Islam (Abd-Allah, 1983; Stevenson, 1983), anthroposophical and theosophical European doctrines (Morrisson, 2008; Steiner, 1977, 1992, 2011; Querido, 1997), Zoroastrianism (Luhmann, 2002) and others.

The first notion of karmic (based on the cause and effect of a person’s actions) rebirth is found in the Brahmana writings (e.g., *Satapatha Brahmana*), and subsequently the concept of cyclical rebirth (reincarnation) appears in the *Brihadaranyaka* and *Chandogya Upanishads* (Geen, 2007); these are considered among the oldest

philosophical texts and dated circa 6th-5th centuries BCE. Also, the earliest existing Jain texts, such as *Acaranga* and *Uttaradhyayana Sutras*, described the multiple cycles of birth and rebirth as a result of one’s *karma*, where karma is referred to as the concept of “the inevitable and moral consequences of action (karman)” (p. 74). The theory of karma is directly interconnected with the concepts of reincarnation and rebirth (Tart, 2010). According to Vedic texts, it was believed that the law of karma directly influences a person’s good or evil rebirth (positive or negative causes for one’s birth; O’Flaherty, 2007); the concept of karma as a law of retribution developed out of earlier (pre-Vedic) philosophy and later took on the meaning of the law of cause and effect (Yevtic, 1927). The possibility of accessing the information related to past lives through a contemplative trance, a state of consciousness reached in a concentrated meditation, was noted in Patanjali’s *Yoga-Sutras* (circa 5th-6th century CE) of India (Whicher, 2005).

The most recent scientific research on reincarnation and past lives has been done by Ian Stevenson, who dedicated almost a half of a century of his professional life to the investigation of cases of the reincarnation type (Kuhlmann-Wilsdorf, 2008). Since the early 1960s, Stevenson started to construct a novel area of research focusing on the investigations of the spontaneous cases involving children. These children reported memories of previous lives mostly between two and four years of age and usually stopped speaking about such memories between five and seven (Stevenson, 2000a; Haraldsson, 2003; Tucker, 2007). In many cases, children described the circumstances of death of the previously-lived person, which they recalled were sudden and violent (Stevenson, 1977, 2000a; Haraldsson, 2003). Others recalled circumstances of previous lives, such as claimed relations to their current or to a totally different family, as well as their emotional longings towards their previous family, which may have varied among different cases (Tucker, 2008).

Stevenson (1997b) and other researchers (Mills, 1988; Pasricha, Keil, Tucker, & Stevenson, 2005; Tucker, 2000) identified research parameters that could be found in cases regardless of country and culture. Common characteristics include birthmarks and birth defects matching the wounds of a deceased person; recognitions and remarks explicable from the point of view of a such person; similarities of personality characteristics, such as temper, habits, and talents; and some psycho-emotional

manifestations, such as phobias and phobias, which could not be reasoned from the standpoint of the current life, but rather on the basis of the past life (Stevenson, 1990; Mills, 2008).

The other area of interest for Stevenson was the analysis of the children's behavioral patterns observed when they were engaged in play. Those behaviors apparently represented some elements of previous lifestyles that were unusual and could not be attributed to their current family environments (Stevenson, 2000c; Stevenson & Keil, 2005). In his studies, Stevenson analyzed the impact of past lives on the development of personality in addition to genetic and environmental factors. He believed that genetic and/or environmental influences could not be the only explanations of children's atypical behaviors. (Stevenson, 1977)

He also suggested a possibility that some personality traits inherent to the deceased individuals could be carried over to the children in ways that may not have any conventional explanation (Stevenson, 1977; 2000b). These transfers of some aspects of personality Stevenson identified with what he called a "developmental karma." Stevenson (1977) proposed that the cases he studied provided some evidence that these carry-overs may contain structures of specific cognitive data, as well as behavioral elements including talents and morals. He further argued that, based on the concept of reincarnation, people are directly responsible for their own personality growth and for the outcomes of their deeds. He believed that the practical implications of such interpretation might help to explore and influence human behavior in a way that is principally different from the dominating beliefs of societal and familial liabilities for individual wrongdoings.

Stevenson always stayed focused on the evidence, not accepting any conjecture, in order to maintain the scientific veracity of his data. He never declared that his research provided any proof of reincarnation and always refrained from asserting that he himself believed in it (Kuhlmann-Wilsdorf, 2008). Once, when asked directly whether he believed in reincarnation, Stevenson answered: "The physical marks present strong evidence," with no further comment (Westphal, 2008, p. 131). For that matter, he was persistent in opposing the use of the term "proof" even for the massive evidence that was accumulated as a result of his research (Tucker, 2008). He always referred to his case studies as "suggestive of reincarnation," and "of the reincarnation type," and

maintained that the data he uncovered were consistent with the reincarnation hypothesis.

In all his works, Stevenson adhered to the strictest standards of scientific exploration, including the collection and interpretation of data. He structured his investigations so that first he conducted a series of interviews with the subject, then with members of his or her family (parents, siblings, and grandparents), next he collected available firsthand testimonies of other people (relatives, teachers, neighbors) about subject's statements and behavior related to the claims of remembering his or her past lives (1997b). In the investigations of birthmarks and birth defects, all evidence was examined and documented with detailed descriptions, drawings and photographs (1997a, 1997b). Dates were validated against existing records, such as birth certificates, identity cards, personal journals, and so forth. After that, using the same research protocols and procedures, Stevenson interviewed the family of the claimed previous person. He documented all facts and events related to the interaction between the two families (1977). In order to determine and verify the location of the wounds on the bodies of the deceased persons in cross-examination of the birthmarks and birth defects of the subjects, Stevenson, whenever it was possible, acquired and examined postmortem reports, death certificates, criminal records, and other documents related to the death of the previous person (Mills, 1989; Pasricha, 1998; Stevenson, 1997a, 1997b). Only after thoroughly conducted investigation, Stevenson could conclude that "the [irrefutable] correspondence between wounds and birthmarks and the child's correct statements about the life of the deceased person usually leave no doubt that the correct previous personality has been identified" (Stevenson, 1997b, p. 11). In his references to the past-life identity of a deceased person, Stevenson (1977) preferred to use the term *previous personality* because

the term can be used whether or not an actual deceased person has been found whose life corresponded to the child's statements; nor does its use imply any commitment to a particular explanation of how the child obtained any correct knowledge he [or she] showed about the person identified. (footnote 4, pp. 307-308)

In order for the obtained evidence to be accepted, Stevenson systematically evaluated and ruled out all alternative explanations, such as erroneous

identification of the deceased person; coincidence or random match of a birthmark and a wound; possible genetic origin of a birthmark or birth defect; possible communication between the families prior to the investigation; extrasensory perception, as a means to acquire information about the previous personality; inaccurate or inconsistent testimonies of the participants in the case. Stevenson (1983) strongly believed that in cases where the conventional explanation was obvious, the investigation procedures should be fully inclusive and cover all aspects of the case. Some of the cases were discarded and related documentation was not included in the investigation reports when Stevenson suspected or found any conflicting testimonies, witnesses' biases, participants' questionable motives or behavior, and other procedural or evidential discrepancies. He included only the strongest cases in his final reports (Grof, 2000).

Stevenson demonstrated in many of his documented investigations that the children's claims of previous life memories were a cross-cultural phenomenon, which was not necessarily reliant on the belief in reincarnation common to a specific cultural environment (Tucker, 2008). At the same time, speaking about the cultural influences in cases of reincarnation type, Stevenson (1983) maintained that

the cases of the various cultures reflect, to some extent, the variations in the beliefs about reincarnation. We cannot yet explain these correlations. Two interpretations are obvious: first, the beliefs may influence the development of the cases; second, if reincarnation occurs, the beliefs may influence what actually happens from one life to another. But there may be other explanations also. (p. 743)

Therefore, the belief in reincarnation among certain cultures was a natural factor in identifying the primary geographical areas for the research: northern India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, south central Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and northwest North America (the natives of that region). Cases with similar main features had also occurred "in areas of the world whose peoples find the idea of reincarnation uncongenial or even heretical" (Stevenson, 1977, p. 308), such as in Europe and North America, though the reports from these regions were not as frequent or as rich in details.

Stevenson (1983) researched 79 cases of American children who claimed to remember previous lives (43 males and 36 females). Analyzing the data about

the beliefs related to incarnation in the families of the children, 16% (n = 9) of families believed in reincarnation prior to the children's claims; 37% (n = 21) showed a passing interest in the topic of reincarnation; 20% (n = 11) expressed interest in parapsychology in general, but not specifically in reincarnation; 27% (n = 15) had little or no knowledge about reincarnation; and 29% (n = 23) of reports were insufficient to make a conclusion about family beliefs. In many cases the children's statements about their alleged previous lives were surrounded by mystery and disbelief even causing resentment and scolding by some parents because such claims represented a concept that was not taught at schools and "often conflicted seriously with the beliefs of their parents and other members of their families" (Stevenson, 1983, p. 744). In such cases, parents were resistant to acknowledge the children's statements and dismissed them. Parents' rejecting their children's statements could explain why in 79 American cases only 20% (n = 16) were "solved," meaning that the identity of the alleged deceased person was verified. The majority remained "unsolved" due to insufficient information to discover the children's claimed previous personality.

There was a significant difference between American and Indian samples of solved cases regarding the relationship between the child and the alleged deceased person. In 94% (n = 15) of solved American cases, that person "was a member of the child's family, such as an older sibling or a grandparent who had died before the subject's birth" (Stevenson, 1983, p. 744), whereas in Indian cases (n = 266), children identified with persons outside their families with whom their family had never met and who lived in different, sometimes distant geographical areas. The similar feature of alleged past-life identities in both Indian and American samples was the high occurrence of violent deaths, found to be 56% and 80% respectively. Those numbers significantly exceeded the incidence of violent deaths in the general population of India (7.2%) and the United States (8%). The other similar characteristic in both samples was the average age when children started to talk about their presumed previous lives, which was three years. However, the average age when these children stopped their past-life recollection was nine and a half years for Indian children and eight years for American children. The reasons for this variation, as Stevenson suggested, could be due to the different degree of parental attention. "When adults lose interest in what the child says, or have

none to begin with, the child himself may stop talking about the memories and forget them earlier than he would if he received more attention” (p. 746).

Stevenson (1983) did not believe that in American cases wish fulfillment was a relevant motivation for children to report their PLEs, since their present-life conditions were primarily better than their past-life ones, which were “usually commonplace ones, sometimes lived in less comfortable circumstances than those of the child’s family” (p. 747). At the same time, he did not exclude the likelihood of the child’s behavior associated with the previous personality as fantasy constructions. Although Stevenson, in his analysis of all possible explanations of spontaneous PLEs, considered the plausibility of other interpretations for a small number of his cases, he stated that he accepted reincarnation as the best explanation for the stronger cases (1997b).

Shweder (1986) supported Stevenson’s position regarding the credibility of the reincarnation hypothesis and pointed out some facts contributing to its explanatory value. Although he did not specifically concentrate on moving forward the reincarnation hypothesis, he suggested that various culturally influenced beliefs of religious or non-rational nature, “where reason and evidence are irrelevant to subjective experience” (p. 180), could support common sense based theories about human existence, which are coherent with a variety of observational experiences (Mills & Lynn, 2001). Shweder (1986) believed that the reincarnation hypothesis could provide a strong conceptual ground for people

who are willing to accept as evidence the pervasive intuitive experience of one’s own observing ego and for those who have already adopted a conceptual reference point from which soul exist, for whom reincarnation . . . is at least a theoretical possibility. (p. 181)

He argued that reincarnation could also explain such facts as noticeable personality differences that could be occasionally found in identical twins reared together; similarity between personalities of siblings from one family and people randomly selected from different families; some inborn outstanding abilities (e.g., in mathematics or music) of children that are unique in the family and that could not have been gained due to imitation or training (Shweder, 1986).

Although several of Shweder’s (1986) and Stevenson’s (1960a, 1977) examinations were consistent with the reincarnation hypothesis, some critics believed

that in many cases there were alternative interpretations of the results (Mills & Lynn, 2001). For example,

Many fears and phobias are determined by complex interaction of genetic and physiological vulnerabilities and subtle conditioning events and situational triggers. . . . *Déjà vu* experiences have been ascribed to temporal-lobe lability and deficits that are by no means readily apparent or easily detectable. . . . And contrary to some of Shweder’s earlier claims, research on identical twins has not confirmed that identical twins reared together generally exhibit marked differences in personality or that the personalities of siblings differ as much as those of a pair of people chosen randomly. (Mills & Lynn, 2001, p. 298)

Paul Edwards, an American moral philosopher and contemporary of Stevenson, was a strong opponent of Stevenson’s and his colleagues’ reincarnation research. Edwards (1987, 1997) in his works, which were (in his own words) “attacking reincarnation on both philosophical and empirical grounds” (1997, p. 318), summarized some of the most prevalent objections to Stevenson’s reincarnation hypothesis. These criticisms challenged a variety of areas of Stevenson’s research, implying such characteristic features as sloppy methodology, researchers’ biased approach, lack of real evidence, and ultimately questioning the principle scientific value of such studies. The first criticism of Stevenson’s research was expressed by British historian Ian Wilson, who blamed Stevenson for dismissing, as Edwards (1987) put it, “on the flimsiest grounds the possibility of fraud on the part of the children, their parents, and other interested parties” (p. 12). As a result, Wilson (1981) suggested that there were “serious grounds for believing that Stevenson may have let through rather more fraudulent cases than he would care to concede” (p. 88). Another of Wilson’s disparagements was about what he felt was an inadequately limited amount of information revealed in the studies about vital informants (e.g., children’s parents). He also pointed out the fact that in some of Stevenson’s investigations, the interviewers (including Stevenson himself) did not speak the language of the interviewees and therefore, there was a strong possibility of the investigators’ and interpreters’ personal biases.

Wilson’s critical position towards reincarnation was not unanimously shared. For example, Perry (1981), in his review of Wilson’s (1981) *Mind Out of Time? Reincarnation Claims Investigated*, remarked about

what in his view was Wilson's biased stance towards the reincarnation phenomenon in general, and Stevenson's research, in particular: "If this were all to Wilson's hatchet job on the evidence for reincarnation, it might have damaged a few details, but it would not need to be taken very seriously" (Perry, 1981, p. 167).

In a later review of Stevenson's *Children Who Remember Previous Lives*, Wilson (1988) continued to express his critique. He stated that although he

would be the first to concede that the *idea* of reincarnation seems at face value far more fair and reasonable than its Christian alternative, . . . [he was] saddened at the number of "general readers" likely to be beguiled by him [Stevenson] into believing that the popular fad for reincarnation as championed by Shirley MacLaine and her ilk really does have some serious scientific support. (p. 229)

Stevenson (1988) responded to Wilson's earlier (i.e., 1981) and later (i.e., 1988) criticisms, making it clear that although he exhaustively addressed those criticisms, he believed that the future studies, conducted by him and other researchers, would be able to convincingly speak to Wilson's objections. Stevenson (1988) stated:

Wilson cannot retard the study of the cases suggestive of reincarnation by raising his voice, and I cannot advance it by raising mine. The way ahead, for me at least, lies in studying cases with even stronger evidence of a paranormal process and in having other scientists study similar cases independently of me. (p. 233)

The second criticism was from Indian philosopher and parapsychologist, C. T. K. Chari. Edwards (1997) suggested that Chari, although not rejecting reincarnation, believed that "Stevenson is incredibly naïve and that his reports have no evidential value, [whereas,] in a number of articles Chari has given us some insight into the way Indian cases 'suggestive of reincarnation' are manufactured" (p. 12). In contrast with Stevenson, Chari (1978) was convinced that the reasons why the majority of Stevenson and his colleague's cases occurred in the Middle East, Southern Asia, and the Far East were primarily due to the strong socio-cultural roots of the belief in reincarnation in these geographical areas. He also argued that past-life fantasies in Asian children arose in play or game-like situations, which were "promoted or retarded by conscious or unconscious beliefs, attitudes, and responses of parents, guardians, interested bystanders" (p. 319). Even

though Chari challenged some of the methods and conclusions of Stevenson's research, Edwards (1997) suggestion that Chari "proceeds to lament the 'generally lax' standards of evidence prevailing in India" (p. 12) seemed to reflect more of Edwards' own attitude rather than Chari's criticisms.

The third and fourth examples of criticism of Stevenson's reincarnation research came from a popular literature book by a writer and parapsychologist D. Scott Rogo (1985) *The Search for Yesterday: A Critical Examination of the Evidence for Reincarnation*. One of the stories in Rogo's book provided critique of Stevenson's alleged attitude towards criticisms of his research, which was expressed by David Reed Barker, an anthropologist who assisted Stevenson and his co-researcher, Satwant Pasricha in their investigations of Indian cases. According to Edwards (1997), Barker, who was involved with Pasricha in the investigation of 59 cases, "could not find a single case in which there was convincing evidence of the presence of paranormal process" (p. 13). Stevenson (1986), in his response to allegations, which Barker (1979) stated in his Letter to the Editor of the *Journal of Parapsychology*, refuted Barker's claims:

For many of these cases Barker took few notes himself, and for some he took none whatever. Therefore, for him to write (in his Letter to the Editor of the *Journal of Parapsychology*) about 59 cases "thoroughly investigated" by himself was grossly misleading. (Stevenson, 1986, p. 237)

The other episode, described by Rogo (1985), suggested that Stevenson tried to prevent Champ Ransom, who assisted him with his research in the early 1970s, from publicizing a report containing critical views of Stevenson's work. Stevenson (1986) dismissed Rogo's account of Ransom's report and asserted that "this account is wrong and once more shows Rogo's imagination in play" (p. 237). Besides Stevenson's criticism, Matlock (1986) in his review of Rogo's (1985) book pointed out the author's "casual documentation, uneven analysis and popular writing style" (p. 229). Disregarding Stevenson's (1986) statements, which explained firsthand the situation with Ransom's report, Edwards (1997) nevertheless, insisted that

although Rogo's account of the details of Ransom's report was mistaken, he was not at all wrong in suggesting that it undermines Stevenson's pretense of having provided genuinely scientific evidence for reincarnation. (p. 14)

Edwards (1997) also believed that Stevenson had persistently neglected the major criticisms of his reincarnation studies and made an assertion, although rather questionable, that Stevenson “has never answered the more significant objections and . . . [has made] it a practice not even to mention their existence” (p. 11). Making this claim, Edwards disregarded the fact that various sources (e.g., Wilson, 1981; Stevenson, 1986) pointed to Stevenson’s unbiased but strong policy to discuss and respond to criticisms of his research “always, and only, in scientific journals” (Stevenson, 1986, p. 232).

Carl Sagan, a renowned astronomer, astro-physicist and proponent of *scientific skepticism* (a concept that scientific method is the most appropriate approach to the empirical investigation of reality in search for the truth; Morrison, 2007), was co-founder of a debunking organization, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and a strong critic of many paranormal ideas, including reincarnation (Tucker, 2005). Even though Sagan (1996) personally did not believe in reincarnation, he considered that along with few other claims in the field of parapsychology, claims related to reincarnation research deserve serious attention; specifically those claims, where

young children sometimes report the details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation [stronger cases in Stevenson’s studies]. I pick these claims not because I think they’re likely to be valid (I don’t), but as examples of contentions that *might* be true. (p. 302)

Stevenson had always been open to serious and substantiated criticisms about his work and responded to them in a scholarly manner. He believed that this type of discussion helped improve the methodology and rigor of the reincarnation research. At the same time, he refuted inaccurate allegations and unsubstantiated critical attacks on him, as he believed that for “numerous criticisms that are false and irresponsible, the best antidote is a wise remark attributed to Charles Darwin: ‘A scientist is ultimately judged by what he himself writes, not by what others write about him’” (Stevenson, 1986, p. 238).

Stevenson’s investigation of over 2,500 cases of the reincarnation type (Tucker, 2007) showed that

his vision of the future of the reincarnation research was correct when he anticipated “further accumulation of evidence that will make reincarnation seem to an increasing number of informed persons a more probable explanation than others for cases of the [reincarnation] type” (p. 325). Titus Rivas (2003, 2005), a Dutch philosopher and reincarnation researcher, argued that studies of children who claimed to remember previous lives, have presented the bulk of empirical evidence for the reincarnation hypothesis. Out of all other alternative hypotheses that Stevenson (1977, 1987, 1997b, 2000a, 2003) considered in each of his strong cases, the reincarnation hypothesis was adopted as reasonably parsimonious, and, at the same time, as necessarily comprehensive, the one that is supported by exhaustive evidence. Although, in some cases of reincarnation type (CORT), apart from the normal explanation (e.g., self-deception and fantasy), the other hypotheses might have been more parsimonious (e.g., ESP), they did not provide a comprehensive explanation for such cases, whereas, “in contrast, reincarnation [hypothesis] did fulfill both conditions” (Rivas, 1993, p. 1). Analyzing the studies of CORT that had been done by researchers around the world, Rivas asserted that these cases presented substantive evidence that subjects in these cases recalled their previous lives. Therefore, he considered the reincarnation hypothesis “the most parsimonious sufficient hypothesis that exhaustively explains all details of paranormal CORTs” (p. 8).

Contemporary American philosopher Robert Almeder (1996) elaborated on Rivas’ assertion about parsimony and exhaustiveness of the reincarnation hypothesis by providing strong arguments in support of its plausibility. Referring to Stevenson’s strong, or as he called them rich CORTs, in connection with “the ostensibly unusual behavior of the people in these richer cases,” he stated that “for Stevenson, the behaviors in question have no better, or as plausible, an explanation as the belief in reincarnation” (p. 513). Almeder stated that “the data in the richer reincarnation cases overwhelmingly suggests [*sic*] as the first plausible hypothesis that the subjects in these cases are indeed reincarnated persons” (p. 498). Almeder (2001) argued that it is not necessary for the reincarnation hypothesis to demonstrate how or why the phenomena of reincarnation produced the data in order to provide acceptable explanation for it in the rich cases.

So, there is a *prima facie* plausibility to the reincarnation hypothesis as an explanation of the data in the richer cases because the content of the richer cases is precisely what we would expect or predict if we thought there was any evidence at all that would confirm the hypothesis of reincarnation. (p. 497)

Almeder (1996) believed that the reincarnation hypothesis (in contrast to, for example, psi as a possible alternative hypothesis) “is considerably more plausible because [it is] quite empirically testable and falsifiable” (p. 503) with the only assumption being that human personality was not dependent on bodily continuity over time. He argued that the reincarnation hypothesis has to be accepted for cases of spontaneous PLEs because it is a truly experimental hypothesis that is grounded in continuously manifested people’s experiences and that accepts credible verification:

Reincarnation is indeed an experimental hypothesis that admits of conclusive verification and falsification. True, if we were to regress a large number of people and never get the sorts of memories or unlearned skills that only reincarnation could plausibly explain, or if . . . we were never to come across any more spontaneous cases like the ideal [i.e., very rich] cases, we would need to reject the hypothesis. (Almeder, 1992, p. 269)

Although the reincarnation hypothesis has been argued to provide a comparatively plausible explanation for spontaneous PLEs, there is still no consensus among the scientific community about the ontology of these PLEs. The evidence that has been produced in support of this hypothesis can neither by itself scientifically explain the nature of PLEs, nor explicate possible functional mechanisms of human consciousness that could be involved in and responsible for these phenomena. Among all possible explanations for spontaneous PLEs, the reincarnation hypothesis is argued to be the most reasonably parsimonious, relatively exhaustive, and evidence-supported hypothesis. At the same time, in cases of hypnotic PLEs, there is even less understanding about their ontology, along with a relatively small amount of evidence that could support the reincarnation hypothesis as an explanation of them. The variety of psycho-emotional features exhibited in cases of spontaneous PLEs, as described in Stevenson’s research,

in many ways seemed to be similar to some of those that manifest in hypnotic PLEs. For these reasons, it is not improbable that the reincarnation hypothesis advanced by Stevenson for spontaneous PLEs may also provide a plausible explanation for some hypnotic PLEs. Therefore, future research could be important for the investigation of the ontology of spontaneous and hypnotic PLEs and also for exploring the possibility of them having the same ontology.

Regardless that the scientific explanation for the full range of PLEs is not available at this time, the concept of reincarnation may offer a comprehensive, logically sound, and practically important theoretical framework, which could enable a better understanding of the interconnections and interdependencies between cognitive processes, behavioral characteristics, and emotional manifestations inherent to personality and attempt to explain the perceived meaning of events and circumstances happening in a person’s life. The scientific approach to the examination and evaluation of the evidence for spontaneous, hypnotic, and other forms of PLEs should be seen as a necessary and required methodology for reincarnation research, which could enhance its relevance and its practical implications. This research may significantly contribute to the exploration of the nature of human consciousness, including the investigation of the possibility of its postmortem survival, and to the development of theoretical and applied disciplines, such as psychology, cognitive neuroscience, neurophenomenology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy.

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